

Why Indian women don't want to work

A long time ago when I was in my first job as a trainee researcher in a magazine, I would take the chartered bus (a working people's school bus that collects people from a residential area and drops them in an office hub) from home to office. The art of eavesdropping on conversations must be ingrained because I still remember some of the chatter around. One particular conversation thread was between two women in their 40s. They looked like junior bank staff. The women were discussing how their friends who married men who could support them financially made a better deal. "We now have two jobs—at work and at home." Indian men, it seems, get so tired at work that they have no strength for housework in a double income home.

Data on women participation in the Indian labour force shows that Indian women are preferring to stay at home rather than come out to work. In an excellent [piece](#), Farzana Afridi and Kanika Mahajan deep dive into the National Sample Survey 2011-12 to show that it is actually married women that show a dramatic fall in workforce participation. Instead of joining the workforce as the Indian economy grew from \$284.3 billion to \$1.8 trillion and per capita income grew from \$340 to \$1,480, women's participation in the labour force fell from 47% to 37% over a 20-year period ending 2011-12. While unmarried women in the age group of 15 to 60 saw a rise in workforce participation from 37% to 50%, the number of married women has remained stagnant for 30 years at 20%, they write. Their analysis shows that young unmarried women show an increase in workforce numbers, older unmarried women continue to work, but married women pay the "marriage penalty" on financial independence and workforce participation by dropping out.

Much of the conversation around the decline in women's workforce participation looks at what the workplace and the state can do to make women return to work. Better childcare facilities, more maternity leave, remote working facilities,

safer commutes, better lit streets, better public transport. While these solutions are all needed, these fail to take into account the paternalistic and traditional nature of the Indian household. Household work, childrearing and care, looking after the older people in the home, are all delegated to the women of the house. This is not just true of "them", the blue collar factory workers, it is true for "us", the double standard bearing urban mass affluent homes. Private conversations with almost all the married women who work outside the home, mostly end with accepting this double standard of pretending equality at home when it exists only on the social chit chat circuit and in brave tweets about equality. Look around you—most of the men in leadership roles have women who either work out of home or are full-time homemakers. Aparna Jain in her book, *Own It. Leadership Lessons From Women Who Do*, documents the stories of high-earning women who need to rush home to make fresh chappatis for the joint family, or need husband's permission to buy footwear.

I remember speaking with a lady who was working on getting more women into finance. She said that while the western women's problems relating to work were all in the work place (unequal pay, late meetings and so on), Indian women reported the home place being the big roadblock to work. The home likes the income, but is unwilling to let the woman give up on household work, child care and eldercare duties. Women find it easier to drop out than drop dead from over work.

Yes, we need workplace-related changes. Yes, there is need for safer commutes and cities. But we also need a change at home with an equitable distribution of the work traditionally done by women. Equal work sharing at home for a two-income household will not come without a struggle and it is far easier to drop out than fight. One piece of advice that has worked for some of my friends is this: do not rush in to raise your hand when there is house work on the table. Our deep seated need for external affirmation and acceptance makes us vulnerable to rushing in to do it just right. Step back. Let the work not be done. See how the family reacts. It's a long haul. Begin by stepping back.

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